

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**PRACTICES OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE IN THE CASE OF STUDENTS WITH
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN ESTONIAN BASIC
SCHOOLS**

MA thesis

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**TARTU
2018**

ABSTRACT

Estonia is among those countries that follow the principles of inclusion in education, which means that general education is available to every person regardless of their social and economic background, nationality, gender, place of residence or special educational needs. Parents have the right to choose a school for their child and a basic school must accept all the students to whom the school is a school of residence. As a result, schools need to educate students with special educational needs who not very long time ago were supposed to attend special schools. One area that is insufficiently covered in Estonia is teaching foreign languages to students with learning difficulties. These are students who lack cognitive skills, have difficulty in acquiring basic literacy and in understanding concepts to the extent that they are not able to reach the outcomes of the National Curriculum for Basic Schools.

The aim of the present master's thesis is to observe and describe the situation in practices of teaching English as a foreign language to students who need implementing the Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools. Four aspects are focused on: (1) organisation of teaching (classroom, weekly schedule, support staff), (2) content (learning materials, teaching techniques, assessment), (3) how teaching English falls into the inclusion framework; (4) what are the teachers' perceptions about teaching English to students with learning difficulties, how confident they are and what they lack most. The qualitative, descriptive study was carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews. One set of interview questions was created and the interviews were conducted with eight teachers from three different counties and three different types of schools.

The introduction provides an overview of what inclusion policy has brought about in the context of teaching students with special educational needs in Estonia while bringing into focus teaching students with learning difficulties. Also, special educational needs are defined and three previous studies about teaching English to students with special educational needs are referred to. The literature overview describes what is behind the policy of inclusive education, what is said about teaching foreign languages to students with learning difficulties, and what the situation of teaching students with special educational needs in Estonia is.

The second chapter analyses the interview responses, focusing on the following aspects: (1) how teaching English is organised in terms of the Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools, (2) which materials are used, (3) what kind of teaching techniques are used, (4) whether teachers have opportunities for developing all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar; (5) how the students are assessed and what kind of homework they are given; (6) how teachers understand the term 'inclusive education'; (7) how teachers feel about teaching students with learning difficulties and what they need most. The discussion draws conclusions based on these findings and provides some suggestions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
1. LITERATURE OVERVIEW	12
1.1. Inclusive education.....	12
1.2. Learning difficulties and foreign language teaching.....	16
1.3. Situation of teaching SEN students in Estonia.....	20
2. EMPIRICAL STUDY ON TEACHING EFL TO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES.....	25
2.1. Methodology and data collection	25
2.2. Respondents	27
2.3. Analysis of the responses	29
2.3.1. Organising teaching EFL to LD students on the school level.....	29
2.3.2. Learning materials.....	33
2.3.3. Teaching techniques.....	37
2.3.4. Opportunities for developing language skills	38
2.3.5. Homework and assessment	43
2.3.6. Understanding of ‘inclusive education’	45
2.3.7. Teachers’ confidence and needs in teaching LD students.....	47
2.4. Discussion	50
CONCLUSION	57
REFERENCES	63
APPENDIX	69
RESÜMEE	71

ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

European Agency - European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

ILE – *I Love English* coursebook series by Ülle Kurm & Ene Soolepp

LD students – students whose learning difficulties need implementing SNCBS

NCBS – National Curriculum for Basic Schools

SEN students – students with special educational needs

SNCBS – Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools

INTRODUCTION

The idea of education for all or inclusive education is internationally recognised and the foundation of it was already laid out in Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations 1948), stating that everyone has the right to education and education is directed to the full development of the human personality, promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship regardless of nationality, race, or religion. This universal statement has been elaborated together with specific frameworks for action provided in several documents, such as *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO 1990), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO 1994), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations 2006), *Education & Training 2020 strategy* (The Council of the European Union 2009), *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration* (UNESCO 2015). The time that international organisations have been promoting inclusive education indicates that it is still an ongoing process.

Estonia is among those countries that follow the principles of inclusion in education. According to Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, general education is available equally to every person, parents have the right to choose a school for their child and a basic school is required to accept all the students to whom the school is a school of residence (Riigi Teataja 2010a: §6, §27(1)). Schools must make sure that quality education is provided to every student regardless of their social and economic background, nationality, gender, place of residence or special educational needs (ibid: § 6(1)) and school curricula are designed according to the needs and interests of students (ibid: §6 (3)). Students with special educational needs (SEN students) generally study in a mainstream class of their school of residence (ibid: §47 (1)). Besides teaching in a mainstream classroom, schools are entitled to create special classes or groups in order to organise the studies of SEN students more efficiently (ibid: §51). It has led to the situation where teachers have students of

different needs and abilities in their classroom and have to educate students who not very long time ago where taught in special schools.

Students have special educational needs when they have learning problems or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children of the same age. Mitchell (2014: xiii) says that special educational needs are revealed when a child fails to meet the curriculum requirements or does not develop proper social or physical skills due to sensory, physical, intellectual or emotional factors. In the European Commission report (Marsh et al 2015) on teaching foreign languages to SEN students special educational needs are categorised into four groups: (1) cognitive and learning difficulties, (2) emotional, behavioural and social difficulties, (3) communication and interaction difficulties, and (4) sensory and physical difficulties.

According to Marsh et al (2015: 20), cognitive and learning difficulties include moderate, severe, profound, and specific learning difficulties. Students with moderate learning difficulties have difficulty in acquiring basic literacy and in understanding concepts. They may also have associated speech and language delay, low self-esteem, low levels of concentration and under-developed social skills. Students with severe learning difficulties have significant intellectual or cognitive impairments. They may have difficulties in mobility and coordination, communication and perception, and the acquisition of self-help skills. Profound learning difficulties mean that in addition to severe learning difficulties, students have physical disabilities, sensory impairment or a severe medical condition. They use very simple language or only gestures or eye pointing.

Specific learning difficulties include dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and dysgraphia (March et al 2015: 20). Dyscalculia (Understood 2018a) involves various mathematics-related difficulties, for example understanding concepts (bigger-smaller), using symbols, etc. Students with dyslexia (Understood 2018b) are not able to read accurately and fluently.

They may also have trouble with reading comprehension, spelling and writing. Dysgraphia causes problems in written expression. In case of dysgraphia students may have poor handwriting, struggle with spelling and organising thoughts in writing (Understood 2018c). Dyspraxia makes it hard to plan and coordinate physical movement (Understood 2018d). Students may be unable to perform a wide range of everyday physical tasks, they may show immature behaviour and lack in social skills.

According to Marsh et al (2015: 21), students with milder emotional, behavioural and social difficulties lack social interaction skills, they may be verbally aggressive and lose temper easily, and find it hard to concentrate on a task. Students with more severe difficulties show defiant behaviour and may be physically aggressive. Their attention span is very short. They have a very low self-esteem and they cannot accept praise. In most severe cases students may behave in such a violent way that it requires physical intervention. Some students do not show any signs of aggressive behaviour, but have low self-esteem, cannot cope with communication and learning, tend to be depressive. Kõrgesaar (2002: 40-41) defines the abovementioned difficulties as externalising (outwardly) and internalising (inwardly) emotional and behavioural difficulties, claiming that boys tend to exhibit the former and girls the latter.

According to Marsh et al (2015: 22), students with communication and interaction difficulties struggle with understanding and making themselves understood in spoken interaction. It may be due to their poor or unintelligible speech, limited vocabulary or incorrect language structures. Students with autistic spectrum disorders may also have difficulties in communication due to poor speech, but also because they take the messages literally and cannot take into account the social context. If they cannot follow strict routines, they become anxious. They may respond unexpectedly to sensory stimulations.

Sensory difficulties include hearing and visual impairment. Having a physical difficulty is manifested in reduced mobility or a medical condition (e.g. chronic somatic diseases) that prevents students from participating in everyday school life (Marsh et al 2015: 23).

The spectrum of special educational needs is very wide and the opportunities for dealing with them really complex. Teaching SEN students may require making accommodations in learning materials, teaching techniques, school buildings; involving special educators and assistant teachers; making changes in the organisation of studies and ensuring that curricula are designed to meet students' needs. Estonia has two national curricula for basic schools: National Curriculum for Basic Schools (NCBS) and Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools (SNCBS) (Riigi Teataja 2010b) with a reduced number of subjects, reduced learning outcomes and different weekly schedules. SNCBS is implemented when a student has mild, moderate, or severe/profound learning difficulties, but only on the recommendation of a counselling committee and with the parent's consent (Riigi Teataja 2010b: §1 (1)). SNCBS includes three different learning plans for each category (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendices 1-3). In the present thesis, the term SNBCS refers only to the simplified plan for students with mild learning difficulties, because students who have moderate or severe/profound learning difficulties are more likely to be taught in special schools and their education plans do not require learning foreign languages.

Three master's theses at the Department of English Studies in the University of Tartu have dealt with teaching English to SEN students: students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Ivask 2015), blind/visually impaired students (Lõvi 2013) and autistic students (Salum 2011). Ivask (2015: 65) points out that while teaching ADHD students requires differentiated tasks, they are generally able to achieve the learning outcomes of the NCBS when a teacher can manage their symptoms. Lõvi (2013: 56-57) has reached the same conclusion about blind and visually impaired students, stating that they

can acquire the same language skills as their sighted peers when the information is in accessible format and they have mastered the necessary technical skills. Salum (2011:50) claims that autistic students can “learn and graduate and acquire a profession”, when provided with appropriate surroundings and treatment, and adapted learning materials. Although Salum’s and Ivask’s theses do not allow making any general conclusions about teaching English to particular type of SEN students as they are based on a very small sample, they provide guidelines for teachers who may encounter students with similar special educational needs.

One area of teaching English to SEN students that has not been covered yet is teaching students whose learning difficulties require implementing the SNCBS. In 2014 approximately half of students who were taught according to the SNCBS were enrolled in special schools (1082 students) and another half in mainstream schools where about half of the number studied in mainstream classes (459 students) and half in separate classes (492 students) (Kallaste 2016: 35). Regarding the inclusion policy, the number of SEN students in mainstream schools is supposed to rise (Ministry of Education and Research 2016).

The author of the present thesis has not found any material that might give information about practices or advice on teaching foreign languages to SEN students in Estonia who need implementing the SNCBS. A speech therapist Mare Valk (2010) gives a very general short overview of special educational needs in a mainstream school together with a few suggestions that could help students with particular needs in a foreign language lesson, and also mentions the need for cooperating with support staff (speech therapists, special education teachers, assistant teachers). The web page, the aim of which is to collect materials that are appropriate for teaching according to the SNCBS, includes Estonian, maths, natural science, history and human studies, but nothing about teaching foreign languages (SA Innove n.d.). The SNCBS outlines the weekly lesson plans, expected outcomes and general

teaching principles which differ from those of the NCBS (Riigi Teataja 2010b: 6.2). According to the NCBS, foreign language learning starts in year 3, until the end of basic school the minimum requirement is three lessons a week (Riigi Teataja 2011: § 15), and students must reach level B1.2 by the end of their studies (Riigi Teataja 2011: Appendix 2 (2.2.4.1.)). According to the SNCBS, foreign language learning starts in year 5, until the end of the basic school the required amount is only two lessons a week and students must reach level A2.1 by the end of their studies (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendix 1 (6.2.14.3.)).

It can be assumed that the differences in requirements between the NCBS and the SNCBS may make inclusion in foreign language lessons especially difficult. Delayed starting point, reduced number of weekly lessons and the lack of appropriate materials poses a question of how to organise teaching in a meaningful way and consider the needs of all students. There is a reason to assume that most students who study according to SNCBS learn English as they are not required to learn the second foreign language and English is the most widely taught first foreign language in Estonia (HaridusSILM 2018).

Thus, the aim of the present thesis is to observe and describe the situation in practices of teaching English as a foreign language for students who need implementing the SNCBS in Estonia. These are students from primary to lower secondary level and with mild learning difficulties, which means that they lack cognitive skills, have difficulty in acquiring basic literacy and in understanding concepts. They may also have other special educational needs, but these are not the primary criteria for recommending the SNCBS. These students are referred to as students with learning difficulties (LD students) in the present thesis. Four aspects of teaching are focused on:

- 1) organisation of teaching (classroom, weekly schedule, support staff);
- 2) content (learning materials, methods, assessment);
- 3) how/whether teaching English falls into the inclusion framework;

4) teachers' perceptions (confidence, needs).

The thesis consists of two main chapters. The first chapter gives a literature overview of inclusive education, of foreign language instruction for LD students and of the general situation in teaching SEN students in Estonia. The second chapter presents the research method, sample, data collection, analysis of the results and the discussion. The qualitative, descriptive study was carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions plus a questionnaire for general background of a teacher. The sample consists of eight teachers from different settings – rural, urban, bigger and smaller schools.

1. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The following chapter attempts to give an overview of what is behind the policy of inclusive education, what is said about teaching foreign languages to students with learning difficulties, and what is the situation with regards to inclusive education in Estonia.

1.1. Inclusive education

The basic concept of inclusive school derives from *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994) which underlines the importance of regular schools as the most effective means of avoiding discrimination and ensuring the right of education for all regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. The goal of inclusive school is to build inclusive society. It means that SEN students are educated in mainstream schools in the local communities together with their peers. Exceptions to this rule should be considered on individual basis and even if a student is enrolled in a special school, part-time attendance of a mainstream school should be encouraged.

Placement is probably the most easily recognisable aspect and can be considered the starting point of inclusive education. Data collection of the European Agency Statistics for Inclusive Education (the European Agency) (Watkins et al 2016) is targeted to gathering information about the number of students identified as having SEN and settings where they are educated. As the methodology of data collection attempts to get data that is comparable across countries, it also gives clearer guidelines for national policy-makers about understanding the concept of inclusive education and organising inclusive studies locally. The difficulties are said to lie in two areas: identifying who is a SEN student and what is an inclusive setting. The European Agency has set the following criteria: (1) a student has SEN when he/she receives additional educational support as a result of an official decision; (2)

the official decision means that a multi-disciplinary team that includes members from school and out-of-school has assessed a student's needs, a legal document describes what kind of support is necessary and the official decision is reviewed regularly; (3) an inclusive setting means that a SEN-student is educated in a mainstream class alongside their mainstream peers for 80% or more of the school week.

The data about the numbers and educational settings of SEN-students has been collected biannually since 2002. The latest report (Ramberg et al 2017) reflecting the data from 2012/13 schoolyear suggests that the gap between the countries in regards with the number of SEN-students is wide – from 1.11% (Sweden) to 17.47% (Scotland) of the whole school population. When looking at the data about educational settings in the case of Estonia, Finland and Sweden, it appears that Estonia has a higher rate of SEN students (46.10%) in inclusive settings than others (37.75 and 12.62 respectively); Finland has a higher rate of SEN-students (49.84%) in special classes in mainstream schools than Estonia (17.49) and Sweden does not have special classes; Sweden has more SEN-students (87.38) in special schools than Estonia (36.41) and Finland (12.41).

When looking at the pure quantitative data, it can be concluded that Estonia is ahead of its neighbours in placing SEN students in inclusive settings. However, when we take into account that Sweden has no legal definition of SEN and their educational policy does not allow treating or defining students in need of special support differently from other students and only in exceptional cases students are defined as having SEN and are educated in special schools (SPSM, 2015), it appears that in terms of placement and definition Sweden is the one that is closest to the inclusive education. Thus, the quantitative data about educating SEN students in either inclusive settings, in special classes in mainstream schools, or in special schools, must always be compared with the background information about each country's legislation and data providing systems. Moreover, quantitative data is not by far

sufficient in order to assess the developments in inclusive education. It must be asked whether placement results in another, more important aspect of inclusive education – meaningful education which offers full development of every student’s potential. Another European Agency project describes the detailed indicators for assessing quality in inclusive education, based on the principle that “inclusive education can be understood as the presence /.../, participation /.../ and /.../ achievement of all learners in mainstream schools “(Ebersold & Watkins 2011: 9).

The main aspects that indicate the quality of inclusive education are outlined in Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). **Student-centred approach** is ensured by the flexible curriculum which can be adapted to a student’s needs. In addition, a student receives support starting from minimal help in the regular classroom to special support programmes and assistance from specialist teachers. Formative assessment is engaged to assess a student’s progress and to plan further actions. **Expert teachers** play a key role in the process, for they are the ones who spend most of the time with students – first notice special educational needs and further adapt curricula, differentiate instruction, and assess progress. They are provided with appropriate pre-service and in-service programmes to develop their skills. **Teams** of teachers and support specialists share the responsibility of teaching students with special educational needs. Special schools serve as consulting units and expertise of special education specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, advisory teachers, etc.) is available. School heads are responsible for maintaining the whole school community’s positive attitude and appropriate organisation of studies. **Regional and international** research and development programmes that disseminate the examples of good practice help to create a unified understanding of inclusive education and further improve teaching and learning.

The concepts of inclusive policies must be reflected in important national educational documents that are the basis of organising work at the school and classroom level – national curricula and other relevant legislative acts. Although the curriculum is the most important source document for schools, it hinders the development of inclusive school when teaching is guided solely by the curriculum, but not by the students' needs (Skogen & Holmberg 2004:182). The curriculum in an inclusive classroom is 'a single curriculum' which is accessible to all students; adjustable to different needs, including special educational needs; includes activities that take into consideration both the age and developmental level of students (Mitchell 2014: 303). One part of flexible curriculum is appropriate assessment policy. In an inclusive classroom assessment provides feedback to teachers, learners and parents about what has or has not been achieved, assessment takes into account particular disabilities, helps to set further goals, enables students to show what they have learned (Mitchell 2014: 304-305, Skogen & Holmberg 2004: 222-224).

Teachers play the key role in implementing inclusive education, because they are the ones who work with students on daily basis, thus most likely notice first when a student needs extra or special support. Further on, a teacher is responsible for differentiating teaching by choosing and engaging most appropriate methods. A teacher has to assess a student's achievement; according to that, reflect on chosen methods; make changes, if necessary. Hattie (2003: 1-2) argues that a student's achievement is influenced first by a student him/herself (50%), then by a teacher (30%) and then by home (expectations and encouragement), school (leadership, school and class size, environment) and peers. Mitchell (2014:302) agrees that there are cases when SEN students need distinctive teaching strategies and help of special teachers or therapists (visual or auditory impairment, speech and language difficulties, intellectual and physical disabilities), but mostly SEN students simply require good teaching. Skogen & Holmberg (2004:242) add that the teacher is the

first agent of changes and the innovator in everyday work that is necessary to achieve inclusive practices, but the teacher also needs all possible help and support. Watkins (2012: 7) concludes that inclusive teachers value learner diversity; support all learners; have high expectations for all learners' achievements; work in collaboration with other educational professionals and parents on a regular basis; have appropriate initial teacher education and continue their in-service personal professional development.

All in all, following the policy of inclusive education requires broad-based efforts from everyone involved in education and, most of all, common understanding that inclusive education is more than placement. Although teachers have a great responsibility in providing education for all so that it meets individual needs and abilities, they have to be properly equipped.

1.2. Learning difficulties and foreign language teaching

Several authors agree that in an inclusive school student should be given the opportunity to learn foreign languages even some may argue that a student who has difficulties in their mother tongue should not be forced to face the same in language classes (Sparks 2016, Wight 2015, McColl 2005, Duvall 2006, Kleinert et.al 2007). Excluding LD students from language learning firstly gives them a clear signal that they are different, thus lowering their overall motivation to learn and also deprives them from opportunities that foreign language learning gives them in a wider sense. Kleinert et al (2007: 25) bring out even more reasons why students with learning difficulties might benefit from foreign language instruction: they may need a foreign language for further education; it can improve their sense of belonging and self-confidence as they have the same opportunities as their peers. Learning another language gives students the opportunity to compare their language and culture with other languages and cultures, critically observe the world they live in and develop tolerance

towards others (Wight 2015: 39). McColl (2005: 105-106) supports this, arguing that cultural studies provide context for language studies and students actually enjoy learning about the ways other people live. Moreover, foreign language learning is not something that happens exclusively within formal education, schools lay foundations for lifelong learning and “education should open up potential, not limit it” (Marsh et al 2015: 143).

These arguments coincide with the SNCBS which states that the main goal of simplified teaching is to help a student with mild learning difficulties to become an independent, self-sufficient citizen who acknowledges differences between people, nationalities and cultures (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendix 1 (1)). So, there is no doubt that learning a foreign language is a necessary part of the simplified curriculum. The question remains how to organise teaching a foreign language so that students of different abilities receive appropriate and meaningful instruction and the requirements of inclusive education are met.

The issue is relevant not only in Estonia. In the European Commission report on teaching foreign languages to SEN students it is admitted that “this is an area in which there has been relatively little sharing of experience on good practice, at either policy or classroom level” (Marsh et al 2015:6). Moreover, there is no evidence to what extent is special needs education integrated into initial foreign language teacher education in Europe and it is assumed that, considering the relatively recently introduced inclusion policies, there is need for more in-service training for foreign language teachers who work in mainstream schools (Marsh et al 2015: 17).

As teachers have direct influence on their students’ achievements, it is important that they are provided with appropriate resources and teaching conditions. In addition to teacher education, it is important to constantly reflect on one’s practice, meet regularly with other teachers and support specialist for planning and reviewing the development of SEN students, and broaden the scope of techniques for catering special educational needs of students by

sharing experiences (Marsh et al 2015: 37). Collaborative planning and teaching is essential in providing most appropriate education, because special educational needs are usually complex and each student's solution may be different (Marsh et al 2015: 51). Collaboration may happen in different forms: (1) co-teaching where a general education teacher and special education teacher are equal partners in the classroom; (2) consultation where a general education teacher is responsible for what happens in the classroom and a special education teacher acts as an advisor while meeting outside the classroom; (3) partnership with assistant teachers who usually have more limited training and thus the main responsibility for planning and teaching is taken by a general education teacher; (4) partnership with non-educator specialists (social workers, police officers, physiotherapists, etc.); (5) partnership with parents; and (6) school-wide teams that develop supportive culture and co-ordinate special needs education (Mitchell 2014: 71-73).

Timo Ahonen (Marsh et al 2015: 56) emphasises the need for teaching study skills and learning strategies which enhance learner-independence. These are procedural skills (time management, material organisation), cognitive-based skills (integrating new material with existing knowledge), and meta-cognitive skills (how to select, monitor and use learning strategies). Mitchell (2014: 94) points out that students with learning difficulties do not acquire efficient cognitive skills without teaching them explicitly – they “don't know what strategies to use, or they use the wrong ones, or they don't spontaneously use strategies” which may lower a student's motivation and self-confidence or even lead to aggressive behaviour.

Engaging proper learning strategies helps to store and process the information. In order to understand what kind of problems LD students face, it is necessary to know, how the memory works while learning. Some concepts need to be stored in the primary memory which makes automatic associations, such as letter-sound correspondence, multiplication

tables (Mitchell 2014: 24). In foreign language learning, for example, a certain amount of words or phrases need to be stored in the primary memory, otherwise spontaneous interaction and comprehension is not possible. Automation happens only as a result of sufficient practice and repetition which in the case of LD students takes more effort, but should not happen as ‘drill and kill’ (ibid: 24). In the short-term memory or working memory the new information interacts with the information from the long-term memory and while the amount of items and the time they can be held in the short-term memory is limited, the limitations are even greater in the case of LD students (ibid: 29). It means that for LD students new material should be broken down into smaller steps and more opportunities for encountering the new material should be allowed so that it could be stored in the long-term or permanent memory. Again, rote learning is not an effective way for it. LD students may not know how to remember, how to combine new and already acquired information, they may have difficulty in using the acquired information in different contexts, and the process of retrieving information may be inefficient and slow (ibid: 30). LD students need extra help in storing new information in a meaningful way.

The contributors¹ to the European Commission Report on the teaching and learning of languages in special needs education (Marsh et al 2005), Duvall (2007), Wight (2015) and Mitchell (2014) have pointed out the teaching techniques that are appropriate for LD students. Mitchell describes most of these teaching strategies in his book *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education*. He calls these strategies ‘evidence-based’ as he has relied on over 2000 research articles from a variety of countries from all over the world in addition to his own research and experiences as a teacher educator and consultant in inclusive education (Mitchell 2014: xiv). The teaching techniques that the abovementioned authors point out are as follows:

¹ Robin L. Schwarz, Timo Ahonen, Ian Smythe, Margaret Crombie, Annemarie Vicsek, Christina Richardson

- reducing the syllabus into essential elements, reducing vocabulary demand;
- giving additional time, slowing the pace of presentation;
- explicit teaching of phonology, syntax and semantics;
- frequent review and repetition using different means, but minimal rote learning;
- using graphic organisers, mnemonic devices, and colour-coding;
- role playing, singing, games;
- computer-assisted language learning if materials provide meaningful and appropriate practice, not just for rote learning or keeping students occupied.
- alternative assessment, e.g. language portfolios;
- multi-sensory teaching;
- Total Physical Response;
- Orton-Gillingham method;

All these teaching techniques take into account the memory shortages of LD students.

Multi-sensory teaching means involving more than one sense at a time. For example, a student can see and hear the words, listen to and complete the instructions. One example of multi-sensory teaching is Total Physical Response (TPR) which is good for smaller students and where learning is connected with action. Orton-Gillingham Method takes into account most of the abovementioned teaching strategies: the teaching is multisensory, explicit, structured, sequential, repetitive and cumulative and cognitive. The students' performance is continuously monitored in order to assess the student's needs and plan the lessons accordingly.

1.3. Situation of teaching SEN students in Estonia

According to Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act which came into force on 1 September 2010 (Riigi Teataja 2010a), students with special educational needs (SEN students) must be taught following the principles of inclusive education, i.e. they are taught in a mainstream classroom in their school of residence (ibid: §47). Special educational needs mean that schools need to make certain adjustments in teaching methods or even in the curriculum, study environment and teaching staff. While in some cases schools can decide what kind of support a student needs (ibid: §48), they mostly depend on

recommendations of the counselling committee which must be in turn approved by a parent (ibid: §49). Besides teaching in a mainstream classroom, schools are entitled to create special classes or groups in order to organise the studies of students with special educational needs more efficiently (ibid: §51).

Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (Riigi Teataja 2010a) and the National Curriculum for Basic Schools (Riigi Teataja 2011) do not give strict guidelines how teaching of SEN students must be organised. Schools develop different approaches according to their better understanding, finances provided by local municipality governments and opportunities for hiring support staff (Plado 2016). Estonian Ministry of Education and Research have conducted a study “Inclusive education of SEN students and the effectiveness of related support measures “. The final report of the study (Räis, Kallaste & Sandre 2016) describes Estonia as being in the transitional phase, because reaching the goal of inclusive education requires changing the mentality of the whole society. It is also pointed out that teachers do not get enough support and schools prefer teaching SEN students in separate classrooms. The analysis does not say that increased inclusion has given better prospects in further education or job market, but educators consider it important that SEN students can attend a school close to their home, not a special school. Consequently, although more SEN students are being placed in mainstream schools, it is not yet certain whether they are educated in a meaningful way, so that they can reach their full potential.

Teaching students whose learning difficulties require implementing the SNCBS in a mainstream class supposedly creates considerable additional workload for a teacher and requires additional resources from schools. Karin Simso (2015), a class teacher in Mammaste Primary School speaks about her experience with a special class of LD students where she had to teach five fourth-grade students according to the SNCBS, two fourth-graders according to the NCBS, two first-graders according to the SNCBS and one first-

grader according to the NCBS. When following strictly the documentation that requires completing an individual curriculum for each SEN student, she ended up with nine different curricula which understandably did not work in the classroom. It should be noted that the teacher had just passed two-year requalification courses in the field of special education and felt confident about what she should do, but in the end felt that she was given a complicated task. She could teach general competencies and social skills, but could not reach required learning outcomes. The school did not find it financially possible to employ assistant teachers. Nevertheless, she remained positive about inclusive teaching of SEN students. This experience indicates that even if the teacher has appropriate training and believes in inclusion, he/she has difficulty in teaching students who need special help alone in the classroom, not to mention the extra workload concerning documentation.

The thematic report on meaningful inclusion in the research “Inclusive education of SEN students and the effectiveness of related support measures.” (Räis & Sömer 2016) is probably the best source for finding out what happens in the classroom and what are teachers’ perceptions and needs regarding special needs education in Estonia. The research sample consisted of different focus groups in education at school and outside of school. 50% of teachers questioned reported to have had experience with students who studied according to the SNCBS (Räis & Sömer 2016: 9).

The main aspects that hinder meaningful inclusion according to the teachers in mainstream schools are as follows: (1) limited time resources for additional instruction, (2) lack of assistant teachers, (3) teaching different curricula (NCBS and SNCBS) in the same classroom, (4) too many students in a class, (5) lack of appropriate learning materials, (6) lack of support specialists, (7) lack of competence in working with SEN students and integrating them into a mainstream class (ibid: 16-17). The most effective measures that support inclusion are: (1) support staff who provide support for students and counselling for

teachers, (2) teacher's autonomy in organising teaching on the class level, and (3) creating special classes for SEN students (ibid: 24).

The study reveals (ibid: 35) that while most of mainstream teachers claim that they are able to recognise a SEN student in the classroom and about half of them can get advice or know where to find information about teaching SEN students, they assess their abilities of adapting teaching according to the needs of SEN students to be very low. Thus, they feel that additional training for working with SEN students is necessary. On the other hand, teachers who have had training in special education admit that real competence comes with practice, because SEN students have very different needs and teachers should be resourceful in order to develop the best approaches.

Learning materials (ibid: 47-49) are considered to be sufficient only for the NCBS. Less than half of the teachers say that they have enough materials for students with either individual learning plans or the SNCBS. Teachers seem to have enough simplified materials for teaching Estonian or maths, but report the lack of materials in other subjects. What they need even more than learning materials for students, are the instructions on carrying out activities in the classroom.

Teachers' attitudes (ibid: 40) about educating all students in mainstream schools tend to be more positive than negative, regardless of the challenges that they have met. However, the number of teachers who prefer teaching SEN students in special classes is higher than those who prefer total inclusion in mainstream classes. One reason for this is thought to be the lack of support measures and services in schools, but the study revealed that teachers' opinions about inclusion into mainstream classes did not change even when it was presumed that all necessary support is available.

It is not possible to find out whether any teachers of foreign languages were included in the sample of described research and even if it can be assumed that a lot of issues are the

same for all teachers, there are still some aspects that may make inclusion in foreign language classes more complicated. LD students who are taught according to the SNCBS can start learning a foreign language two years later than their peers and have fewer lessons per week. Great emphasis is placed on oral language development, especially at the beginning. Taking into account what kind of strategies and techniques should be used in teaching LD students, it is hard to imagine how teachers can organise meaningful instruction in the mainstream classroom even with the help of an assistance teacher, not to mention how a teacher can manage alone in the classroom. As inclusion only happens when, in addition to placement, a SEN student gets meaningful instruction according to his/her needs, it is important to know what happens in the foreign language classroom. The author of the present thesis has encountered confusion and doubts among teachers of English about what could be the best approach to teaching students with SNCBS. Thus, it was decided that there is a need for a more in-depth and structured analysis. The most valuable source for that is a teacher who chooses materials, techniques, and can best evaluate a student's progress.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY ON TEACHING EFL TO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

This part of the present thesis gives an overview of the empirical study which was carried out in order to observe and describe the situation in foreign language teaching practices for students who need implementing SNCBS in Estonia. The author's purpose was to find out whether the placement of LD students has resulted in meaningful teaching and learning and what it requires from the teacher. The main focus is on the organisation of teaching (classroom, weekly schedule, support staff), content (learning materials, techniques, assessment), teacher's perceptions (confidence, will, needs) and whether teaching EFL is taught inclusively at schools.

2.1. Methodology and data collection

Considering the possible complexity of teaching English to LD students which may arise due to the inclusive policy in education of SEN students and/or different requirements in the curricula (NCBS and SNCBS), the quantitative study was not considered to give informative data. The aim of qualitative studies is to try to understand and describe the phenomenon that is being researched rather than looking for statistical regularities (Hirsijärvi et al 2007: 168). Interviewing is the data collection method that is mainly used in qualitative studies (Hirsijärvi et al 2007: 192). Interviewing is chosen when (1) it is difficult to predict the direction of answers, (2) many different responses are expected, and (3) it is assumed that there is the necessity to specify the answers (Hirsijärvi et al 2007:192). The form of a semi-structured interview is controlled, but allows additional spontaneous answers (Cohen et al 2007: 349). In qualitative studies the sample can be small and is considered to be sufficient when saturation is achieved (Hirsijärvi et al 2007: 169). Also, the qualitative study does not

attempt to generalize the results, but tries to bring out important aspects of a phenomenon by studying a single case more thoroughly (ibid).

For these reasons, data in this study was collected in the form of semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix 1 for the list of questions asked). Eight interviews were conducted during the period of March-April 2018. Prospective interviewees were approached either directly or via email. They were informed about the aims of the study. Their permission for recording the interviews was asked and they were assured that the data collection is confidential and anonymous. Three interviews were conducted at the respondents' schools, one interview at the author's school and four interviews via Skype. All the interviews were recorded and there is 5 hours of recorded data altogether. The interviews were conducted in Estonian and translated into English by the author.

Convenience sampling was used when choosing the participants for the present study. In order to simplify the process, the list of schools where students were taught according to the SNCBS in 2017/18 academic year was obtained from the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. It was attempted to include teachers of English from different settings – rural and urban schools, small and large schools, basic and secondary schools. As for secondary schools, only those that teach forms 1-12 were included as the SNCBS is implemented on basic school level. The list from the Ministry provided information only about schools where the SNCBS is implemented in forms 7-9. During the interviews it occurred that some teachers also teach students in forms 5-6 and data about them was not excluded, because it was difficult to make distinctions between teaching these two levels. Another criterion that was taken into account when choosing the participants was whether LD students are taught in the mainstream or separate classroom as the list from the Ministry included such data as well. It was attempted to include both the settings.

2.2. Respondents

The sample consists of eight respondents from three counties and three different types of schools – gymnasium (2), large urban basic school (1) and small rural basic school (5). The background data that was collected from each respondent included the following information: age, general teaching experience and experience with LD students, qualifications, training in the field of special education, and the current occupation at school.

Respondent 1 (further T1) is 50+ years old, has 30+ years of general teaching experience and 9 years with LD students. She has the primary school teacher diploma and currently works as an assistant teacher in a gymnasium. She has had some in-service training courses in the field of special needs education, including one longer (160-hour) course “SEN student at a mainstream school”

Respondent 2 (further T2) is 50+ years old, has 30+ years of general teaching experience and 15 years with LD students. She has MA in education management and has passed requalification courses in teaching English. She works as a teacher of English and an assistant head teacher in a small rural basic school. She has had no training in the field of special needs education.

Respondent 3 (further T3) is 30+ years old, has 10+ years of general teaching experience and 10 years with LD students. She has BA in primary education, including minor in English and currently works as a teacher of English and a substitute teacher of Estonian in a small rural basic school. She has also passed the course “SEN student at a mainstream school”

Respondent 4 (further T4) is 50+ years old, has 30+ years of general teaching experience and started teaching LD students only the present school year. She has higher education in Russian language and literature and has passed requalification courses in teaching English. She works as a teacher of English in a big urban basic school. She has had some shorter in-service courses in the field of special needs education.

Respondent 5 (further T5) is 40+ years old, has 20+ years of general teaching experience and 8 years with LD students. She has MA in special education and has passed requalification courses in teaching English. She works as a teacher of English and handicraft, special education teacher and an assistant head teacher in a small rural basic school. She has had regular in-service training in the field of special educational needs (2-3 courses every year).

Respondent 6 (further T6) is 50+ years old, has 20+ years of general teaching experience and started teaching LD students the present school year. She has higher education in biology and has passed requalification courses in teaching English. She works as a teacher of English, biology and chemistry in a small rural basic school. She has had some shorter in-service courses in the field of special needs education.

Respondent 7 (further T7) is 40+ years old, has 20+ years of general teaching experience and 3 years with LD students from 2007 to 2011 in addition to the present school year. She has MA in educational sciences as a teacher of several subjects in basic school (English and social sciences). She works as an assistant head teacher and a substitute teacher of English. She had a course on special education during university studies and has had some shorter in-service courses.

Respondent 8 (further T8) is 20+ years old, has 2 years of general teaching experience and has taught LD students from the beginning of her teaching career. She has MA in legal studies and started teaching at school through the programme “Noored Kooli” (similar to “Teach First” in the United Kingdom). The programme offered a course about differentiated teaching and apart from that, she has received no training in special needs education. She works as a teacher of German and teaches English in form 4 and for LD students in a gymnasium.

2.3. Analysis of the responses

The analysis is based on the responses in eight semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1). The answers of the respondents are indicated as T1-T8 (teacher) and in some cases Sc1-Sc8 (school) respectively when organisation of studies is analysed as it is done on the school level.

2.3.1. Organising teaching EFL to LD students on the school level

According to the principles of inclusive education, SEN students, including those whose learning difficulties need implementing the SNCBS, are generally taught in mainstream schools where three options are possible: (1) in a mainstream classroom, (2) in a separate classroom, or (3) combined. Three options also emerged from the interviews; however, the classification is slightly different as seen in Table 1. The requirements of the SNCBS are that LD students start learning a foreign language in form 5 and study it 2 lessons per week until the end of the basic school. This requirement is not always followed for different reasons.

Table 1. How is teaching LD students is organised at schools?

School	Classroom	LD students' level	Started learning English	Lessons per week
Sc1	separate class	form 8	form 5	3 lessons
Sc8	special classes for LD students	form 5-7 form 8-9	form 5	2 lessons
Sc7	special class for LD students	form 5, 7, 9	form 5	2 lessons, one student 3 lessons
Sc3	mainstream class, with peers	form 5 form 6	form 3 form 3	4 lessons 3 lessons
Sc4	mainstream class, with peers	form 7	form 2	3 lessons
Sc6	mainstream class, with peers	form 7	form 3	2 lessons
Sc2	mainstream class, not with peers	form 7 form 9	form 5	2 lessons
Sc5	mainstream class, not with peers	form 5 form 7	form 3	2 lessons

Special classes are created for students who learn according to the SNCBS in two schools. In both the cases these are composite classes. In Sc7 there is a class of three students from forms 5, 7, and 9 who each have a separate learning plan and different learning materials. In Sc8 there are two classes, one of six students from forms 5-7 and another of five students from forms 8-9. In each class students follow the same learning plans and use the same materials. The teacher finds it possible because students are on a relatively same language level within one class – “they are well teachable together”, as T8 has noted. In Sc1 the situation is similar to Sc8, meaning that LD students learn English in a separate classroom and use the same materials. However, they officially belong to the mainstream class which means that they have some other lessons together with their peers and all three students are of the same age group (form 8). The decision to have English lessons separately was made because this way it is possible to do more oral work as it is required in the SNCBS. In all the three schools, students started learning English in form 5 and have had 2 lessons per week so far. Exceptions in Sc1 and Sc7 were made for the present school year (2017/18). In Sc1 all the three students have 3 lessons per week as they have advanced well and enjoy learning English. In Sc7 form 9 student has 3 lessons per week following for the same reason. This student has one individual lesson. In both the cases free weekly lesson resource is used so the students do not exceed the allowed maximum weekly workload.

In three schools LD students are taught in the mainstream classroom together with their peers. In Sc3 there is one LD student in form 5 and another in form 6. In Sc4 there is one LD student in form 7 and in Sc6 two LD students in form 7. They all started learning English at the same time as their peers – in Sc3 and in Sc6 in form 3 and in Sc4 in form 2, but he reasons vary. In the case of Sc6, the curriculum change for one student was made only in the middle of the present school year. Another student started learning in this school at the beginning of the present school year and the teacher (T6) does not have information about

his previous studies. Similarly, T4 was unable to say why the requirements of the SNCBS have not been followed in the case of her LD student, because she has not taught him/her before the present school year. It indicates that there is the lack of cooperation both between schools and within a school. In the case of Sc3, it is not possible to create timetables that meet precisely the requirements of SNCBS, because it would require at least some individual lessons and consequently additional staff. Thus, LD students participated in English lessons in forms 3 and 4, did simple tasks and they were not graded. While in Sc3 and Sc4 students have had the same number of lessons as their peers throughout their English language studies, in Sc6 students have 2 lessons of English per week after implementing the SNCBS.

In two schools (Sc2 and Sc5) LD students are taught in the mainstream class, but, differently from Sc3, Sc4 and Sc6, not together with their peers. In Sc2 LD students are in forms 7 and 9. Both of them started learning English in form 5 and have 2 lessons per week. Form 7 student has one individual lesson and one lesson together with form 6. Form 9 student has both lessons together with form 6. The reason is that 6th-formers are on the relatively even language level, the class is small and the teacher can have some time to teach the LD student individually. In Sc5 LD students are in forms 5 and 7. Both of them started learning English in form 3. Form 7 student started learning according to the SNCBS in form 5 and by that time he/she had already learned English together with peers for two years. Although form 5 student started learning according to the SNCBS in form 2, the student's abilities in oral language acquisition enabled to begin with English earlier. Form 5 student studies English together with form 6, because the general atmosphere in this class suits him better emotionally and in most language aspects besides writing he is almost at the same level as the others. Form 7 student has studied English together with form 4 for several years, because he/she advances very slowly and has serious problems with memory. At the same time, he/she is emotionally stable and fits in with any class. So, there are two reasons for

organising teaching this way in Sc5. On the one hand, the teacher can teach the whole class, using the same materials, on the other hand, students' language level and emotional state is taken into consideration.

The responses reveal that teaching in a separate classroom or in a mainstream classroom but not with peers allows more flexibility in planning the timetable so that it meets the requirements of SNCBS. In addition to that, schools might have more opportunities for considering individual needs and abilities of LD students. The approach to the organisation of studies seems not to be dependent on either the setting or the size of a school. Special classes are in one gymnasium and in one small basic school. Teaching English in a separate room is organised in one gymnasium. LD students are taught in mainstream classes together with their peers in two smaller basic schools and in one larger basic school. In two smaller basic schools LD students study English together with other age groups.

All the schools have support specialists. There are speech therapists in four schools, assistant teachers in three schools, social pedagogues in five schools and special education teachers in five schools. In four schools one support specialist also performs the duties of a SEN coordinator. However, none of the respondents get any kind of help in teaching English from the support staff. Two teachers (T3 and T4) say that they cannot help as they do not know the language. One teacher is not sure that they can help. Three teachers (T1, T3 and T5) have more thorough knowledge about special needs themselves. Two teachers (T4 and T7) get general information about SEN students and two teachers (T4 and T8) get help with the documentation. The results indicate that collaborative teaching is not a common practice.

As seen from the responses above, the ways LD students are taught are very different and the reasoning behind the way they are taught verge from the language level of students to their emotional needs and in some cases it is the question of simple practicality - in which

lesson can the teacher offer the most help to the student. What is clear, though, is that the decisions regarding the way LD students are taught are done on case by case basis.

2.3.2. Learning materials

As no information is available on learning materials that suit the needs of LD students, teachers have to make decisions according to their best understanding. Probably the only guiding principle is CERF level A2 that LD students have to reach at the end of basic school (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendix 1 (6.2.14.3)) which is the same for other students who finish form 6 (Riigi Teataja 2011: Appendix 2 (2.1.5.1)). *I Love English* (ILE) series appear to be the most commonly used coursebooks by the respondents of the present study. Although they are not marked according to CERF levels, they correspond to the NCBS and thus provide at least some framework for teachers. The question is whether these materials are appropriate for LD students even if they support acquiring a certain language level.

T1 and T8, who teach LD students in separate classrooms, use the same materials within the class, while T7, who also has LD students in a separate classroom, uses a different coursebook for each student, taking into account each student's level. In all the cases LD students' coursebooks are different from those used in mainstream classes. T2 and T5 teach LD students in the mainstream class, but not together with their peers. While T2 uses different coursebooks for LD students in the classroom, T5 has placed her LD students so that the same learning materials could be used. T3, T4 and T6 teach LD students in the mainstream class together with their peers, but while T4 and T6 use the same materials, T3 has different coursebooks for LD students. No certain patterns emerge from this data, which indicates that choosing a coursebook might in some cases depend on other factors than placement or the level of LD students (Table 2).

Table 2. Which coursebooks are used for teaching LD students?

Res pon dent	Classroom	Mainstream class level	LD students' level	Mainstream class coursebook	LD students' coursebook
T1	separate	-----	form 8	-----	ILE 3
T7	separate	-----	form 5,7,9	-----	Way Ahead 1,3 Access 1
T8	separate	-----	form 5-7	-----	Upstream A1+
T8	separate	-----	form 8-9	-----	no coursebook
T2	mainstream	form 6	form 7	ILE 4	ILE 2
T2	mainstream	form 6	form 9	ILE 4	ILE 5
T5	mainstream	form 6	form 5	ILE 4	ILE 4
T5	mainstream	form 4	form 7	ILE 2	ILE 2
T3	mainstream	form 5	form 5	ILE 3	Pop-up Now 1
T3	mainstream	form 6	form 6	ILE 4	Pop-up Now 1
T4	mainstream	form 7	form 7	ILE 5	ILE 5
T6	mainstream	form 7	form 7	ILE 5	ILE 5

None of these coursebooks are specially targeted to LD students, which means that teachers cannot merely take a book and base teaching on it. Some tasks may be too difficult and may be excluded, but that is not sufficient. In order to learn a certain topic, LD students need more practice and revision than their non-LD peers. As the practice of six respondents indicates, adaptations need to be made and additional materials created even when the selection of coursebooks is made based on a particular student's expected level.

T1 relies on the coursebook, but leaves out more difficult tasks. As listening tasks on CDs are too fast-paced, she firstly lets students listen to CDs and then reads herself in order to give students the sense of a native speaker's speech, but also the feeling of success. T2 leaves out all the grammar tasks and puts emphasis on vocabulary and reading. T3 has so far selected only very few tasks from ILE books, and has decided to "test" another coursebook (Pop-up Now 1), which "is not very good, but provides opportunities for individual work" while the teacher is dealing with the rest of the class and reduces the necessity of compiling or finding additional materials. T5 simplifies and reduces the coursebook material. As one student has serious writing difficulties, then such tasks are reduced to minimum. Also, more complicated texts are read aloud, with the teachers help, because the student understands

better when he/she can hear the words. Workbook exercises are given selectively and only when copied in enlarged format. T7 leaves out long and complicated reading texts and difficult grammar topics, emphasis is on vocabulary and everyday communication. T8 uses a coursebook with one class only, so as to have at least some framework. She leaves out difficult topics, chooses the ones that are of interest to students and spends more time on those, providing additional material.

Two respondents teach their form 7 LD students, using the same ILE5 coursebook as with the mainstream class. T4 says that LD student does not do all the exercises, does them with the help of a classmate or the teacher, is allowed to take tests with the help of learning materials and has to learn less words than classmates. T6 admits that although LD students formally have the ILE5 coursebook, they are able to do very few tasks from it, only some reading tasks with the help of other students.

Considering the limitations in using coursebook materials, it can be assumed that teachers need to compile materials themselves and so do all the respondents, either from scratch, using ready-made materials of lower levels, or adapting ready-made materials.

Five respondents (T1, T3, T5, T7 and T8) have collected numerous picture material:

- lotos and dominos,
- pictures by topics to support vocabulary learning,
- illustrative material for learning grammar,
- colouring-in according to instructions for reading practice,
- describing pictures for speaking practice.

Two teachers (T1, T7) point out that LD students like to learn vocabulary rather by picture-to-word than word-to-word association and simple colourful schemes enhance understanding grammar topics.

Five respondents (T2, T3, T5, T6 and T8) mention compiling crosswords, which are used for learning, revision, and even for testing. T3 adds that crossword tests are easier as students see how many letters there are in a word. Creating crosswords is probably one of the least

time-consuming tasks for teachers and enables using exactly those words that the teacher wants to concentrate on.

Equally, five respondents (T3, T5, T6, T7 and T8) find materials from the Internet. These can be print-out worksheets, videos, listening tasks, games, programmes. T7 has access to interactive online materials and CD-ROMs with games provided by the coursebook *Way Ahead* publisher. In her opinion, *Way Ahead* is suitable for LD students as it contains a lot of illustrative material up to level A2 and basic grammar is presented in small steps. Other sources mentioned by the respondents are as follows:

- Taskutark and LearningApps as sources for different online games;
- Quizlet as an easy programme for creating vocabulary tasks (students can hear and see the words, pictures can be included, and words can be practised in various ways);
- web dictionaries;
- British Council, ISLCollective as sources for worksheets and interactive material;
- illustrated texts with listening;
- texts that student can listen and read (the word that is read out is highlighted);
- songs with lyrics;

T5 uses various matching tasks, which helps to minimize the necessity of writing in case of serious writing difficulties. Three respondents altogether (T3, T5, T6) point out different matching tasks:

- picture-word cards or word-word cards;
- sentences, dialogues or stories cut into pieces;
- phrases in Estonian on a worksheet, a student has to find a corresponding English phrase from the textbook;
- vocabulary tests where a student has to match English and Estonian words.

All in all, it appears that teachers have a considerable additional workload in regards with compiling learning materials for LD students. Even when they use ready-made materials, it still takes time to search for appropriate ones, quite often adaptations have to be made and materials have to be organised according to the topics. As teachers admit that coursebooks they use are not suitable for LD students and they do not get advice from special educators, it can be assumed that the suitability of the materials depends only on a teacher's knowledge about learning difficulties, which is not uniform, considering the data about the respondents'

training and experience in the field of special educational needs. Only T1, T3, and T7 explicitly mention following the topics or teaching principles in the SNCBS. However, it does not mean that other respondents do not follow the SNCBS as interview questions did not specifically refer to that.

2.3.3. Teaching techniques

When asked about teaching techniques that have worked well with LD students, two respondents (T1 and T5) point out the necessity of being flexible and creative as the success of one or another way may depend on a certain day, or a certain student. One respondent (T7) also argues that sometimes it requires a lot of patience from a teacher to get an LD student to concentrate on a task. As can be seen in Table 3, respondents who can bring out more different techniques also have more experience with LD students and as a result, more additional materials to choose from (T1, T2, T3, T5, T7). Another aspect which supports implementing a variety of techniques seems to be teaching LD students in a separate classroom or with students on a similar level which enables active learning (T1, T5, T7, T8).

Table 3. Which teaching techniques work well with LD students?

Techniques that work well	Respondents
Games	T1, T5, T7, T8
Activities that involve movement	T1, T7, T8
Computer-based activities	T3, T5, T7, T8
Taking the teacher's role	T1, T7, T8
Scaffolding (providing models, instructions in Estonian, more difficult words translated, simple schemes for grammar rules)	T2, T3, T7
Direct instruction (working together with a teacher)	T2, T6, T7
Crosswords	T2, T8
Drill (but not monotonous)	T5, T7
Revision, connecting the new with the old	T7
Peer help	T3
Working in a group (sense of belonging)	T4
Breaking the material into small steps	T3
Reading the texts aloud	T5
Reducing the amount	T3
Dramatisations	T1

The respondents were also asked to describe learning techniques that do not work well with LD students. When looking at the data (Table 4), it appears that they have mostly mentioned various tasks from coursebooks which may indicate that learning materials meant for mainstream classes are generally not suitable for LD students. T8 is the only one who says that nothing has been absolutely unsuitable, but she does not use any coursebooks with one class and only to some extent with another. T5 says that pair work is not suitable for these particular students, but she has had LD students who work in pairs well.

Table 4. Which teaching techniques do not work well with LD students?

Techniques that do not work well	Respondents
Individual writing tasks	T1, T4
Grammar exercises (e.g. put the verb into the correct form)	T1, T2
Speaking during frontal work with the class	T3
Coursebook listening tasks	T3, T7
Coursebook reading tasks	T7
Using paper dictionaries (takes too much time. does not know the alphabet)	T4
Individual reading with the help of a dictionary	T6
Translating sentences	T6
Working long on one task	T5
Pair work	T5

The results again show that in order to employ teaching techniques that are suitable for LD students, teachers need to do extra work for compiling materials as coursebook tasks are most often considered to be too difficult. Also, a teacher's previous training and experience with LD students seem to be crucial elements as, differently from other respondents, T4 and T6 can point out very few techniques that work well on LD students.

2.3.4. Opportunities for developing language skills

Language learning involves developing four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. In case of the SNCBS more emphasis should be placed on oral language: the use of listening and speaking skills. However, the table below reveals shortages in teaching exactly these skills.

Table 5. Do you have opportunities to teach all the four language skills?

Resp	Classroom	Materials	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
T1	separate	same	yes	yes	yes	yes
T8	separate	same	yes	yes	yes	yes
T5	mainstream	same	yes	yes	yes	yes
T7	separate	different	not as much as needed	not as much as needed	yes	yes, should be less
T2	mainstream	different	very little	little	yes	yes
T3	mainstream	different	not as much as needed	very little	more than needed	more than needed
T4	mainstream	same	yes	very little	yes	very little
T6	mainstream	same	very little	very little	yes	yes

Only three respondents (T1, T8 and T5) have enough opportunities for developing all the four language skills. T1 is the most satisfied, saying that she has enough time for everything and students have acquired what they have learned. Similarly, T8 and T5 say that there are no problems in terms of time, but they point out that students are not able to perform equally well in using the four skills. T8 says that reading and listening are the skills that students cope with best, but speaking and writing are possible only when models are provided. She also refers to reading aloud as speaking. T5 points out that even if she has opportunities as she has placed students in mainstream classes according to their language level, quite a lot depends on a student's abilities. One student has serious writing difficulties, so the teacher keeps writing tasks to minimum. Another student has serious learning difficulties in general, being unable to memorize even vocabulary, thus the teacher finds that it is not possible to speak about developing the four language skills.

Three respondents (T2, T3 and T7) who teach LD students using leaning materials on different levels in the classroom claim to have the least time for listening and speaking, because it requires individual work with the student, but they do not have enough time for it. T2 has one individual lesson with one student and can do at least some listening and speaking, but has practically no opportunities with another student. T3 also says that she has individual lessons in Estonian with one student and sometimes uses this lesson resource for

developing speaking skills in English. This has been of great help, because the student, who feels uncomfortable with oral expression among his/her peers, has become less afraid of speaking. T7, who shares her time between three LD students during a lesson, feels that more time should be spent on speaking and less on writing, but each student has to work individually for some time and the easiest way is to assign written exercises. However, she tries to discuss all the written assignments orally beforehand and/or afterwards. She can do listening, using the computer and headphones, but it requires finding appropriate tasks as coursebook materials lack them.

T4 and T6 who teach LD students together with their form 7 peers claim speaking and writing to be the weakest skills. However, they do not mention the absence of opportunities, but the students' abilities. They both point out that LD students are not capable of independent language production. T4 says that her student feels uncomfortable when speaking among his/her peers, is able to produce only a few sentences, spontaneous conversation is not possible, can write only with the help of models. T6 mainly uses reading texts aloud as oral tasks and also models for writing. Their opinions about listening differ. They both use the same listening tasks with the other students. T4 says that her student "can cope", while T6 argues that form 7 listening tasks are beyond her LD students' language level. Reading tasks are also the same; these are done with the help of classmates or the teacher.

Developing four language skills depends on how well students acquire vocabulary, pronunciation and language structures. Similar patterns occur here.

Table 6. Do you have enough time for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar?

Resp	Classroom	Materials	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Grammar
T1	separate	same	yes	yes	yes
T8	separate	same	yes	yes	yes
T7	separate	different	yes	yes	yes
T5	mainstream	same	yes/depends	yes/depends	yes/depends
T2	mainstream	different	yes	little	very little
T3	mainstream	different	yes	little	very little

T4	mainstream	same	yes	little	no
T6	mainstream	same	yes	little	no

Respondents who teach LD students in a separate class (T1, T8, T7) are at an advantage. T1 and T8 have no problems with devoting time on all the three areas as their students use the same learning materials, but T7 also admits that with careful planning she is able to devote time to all the three areas with each student even in the composite class conditions. Regardless of teaching in the mainstream class, T5 has opportunities as the learning materials are the same, but it depends on a student. One student is able to work with the rest of the class and can pick up language patterns while watching films or playing computer games which makes learning grammar easier for him/her. The other one needs one-to-one teaching due to his/her more serious learning difficulties, but the teacher does not have enough time for that in the mainstream class. T2 and T3 cannot find enough time to practice pronunciation and teach grammar, because these need individual work. They admit that teaching grammar is possible only on a very simple level either with the help of models (T3) or on a recognition level which involves finding similar patterns from the text (T2). T4 and T6 also find form 7 grammar to be too difficult for LD students. T4 says that her student does grammar exercises together with classmates, but actually does not understand it. T6 tries to find exercises that correspond with her students' level, but their vocabulary is still extremely basic and they cannot cope with even simple grammar. Time for teaching them individually is limited in the both cases.

The respondents were also asked how much time they spend on frontal, individual, group and pair work. The results again need further comments as reasons for choosing particular forms of teaching do not depend merely on placement and materials, although some patterns emerge (Table 7).

Table 7. How much time is spent on frontal teaching, individual learning, pair work and group work?

Resp	Classroom	Materials	Frontal teaching	Individual learning	Pair work	Group work
T1	separate	same	little	very little	mostly	mostly
T8	separate	same	mostly	very little	mostly	no
T7	separate	different	no	mainly	no	no
T2	mainstream	different	no	mainly	no	no
T3	mainstream	different	occasionally	mostly	occasionally	occasionally
T4	mainstream	same	mainly	no	occasionally	occasionally
T5	mainstream	same	mostly	mostly	no	no
T6	mainstream	same	little	little	mainly	occasionally

When LD students have different materials, it can be assumed that most of time is spent on individual learning and the amount of frontal work is non-existent. T3, who claims that she does frontal teaching actually means explaining something to the LD student separately in front of the classroom. So, it is rather individual than frontal teaching. T7 and T2 can do neither pair work nor group work. However, teacher 7 thinks that it may be possible to organise LD students' individual learning plans so that some general topics are taught at the same time which would give opportunities for interaction between students. T3 tries to include LD students in pair work and group work, giving them simple tasks in order to give them the sense of being a part of the class.

Four respondents spend very little or no time on individual work, but for different reasons. T1 and T8 have students on the same level in their classroom, thus they can work with the class as a whole. T8 says that individual learning is sometimes necessary when a student has fallen behind or wants to practise certain aspect more. T4 and T6 claim that they lack time for giving individual instructions and LD students cannot cope by themselves. So, the student either participates in frontal teaching (T4) or works with the help of a classmate (T4 and T6). As it is with T3, the main aim of the group work for T4 is to give the LD student the sense of being a part of the class.

T5 says that she has had LD students who do pair work and group work, but currently one student cannot cooperate with classmates due to emotional difficulties and the other one's language level is below that of the classmates due to serious learning difficulties. T8 comments that her students do not do group work because the classes are small (4-5 students) and are both like one group. At the same time T1 has even less students (3) in her classroom, but says that they do a lot of group work. It may be so because T1 and T8 define group work differently while they both actually let their class perform some tasks in cooperation.

To conclude, teachers who LD students in a separate classroom are generally at an advantage – they can develop all language skills, they have time for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Their students are involved actively in group work and pair work.

2.3.5. Homework and assessment

The assignment that is given most often is revising vocabulary, mentioned by seven respondents (the only exception being T2). Three respondents (T1, T2 and T7) have their students to revise the text that they have read in the lesson. Only two respondents (T1 and T4) give their LD students homework in almost every lesson. T1 adds that her students are positive about home assignments and sometimes ask if they can finish an exercise that they could not complete in the lesson. T4 says that homework is the same as for the other students in class, but LD students can learn fewer words or complete only a part of an exercise. Six teachers give homework very rarely, because students are not able to learn independently and nobody helps them at home (T2, T6); they already have too much individual work in the lesson (T3); they reach home quite late (T3); it is attempted to have all the work completed in lessons (T7, T8).

When asked about assessment, the respondents refer to tests or tasks that students are given grades for (Table 8). Six teachers mention checking the vocabulary, three teachers grading exercises done in lessons, two teachers giving tests, two teachers speaking activities and one teacher reading activities (reading and translating).

Table 8. What students get their grades for?

Graded tasks or tests	Respondents
Vocabulary acquisition	T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8
Exercises done in lessons	T2, T5, T6
Tests	T3, T8
Speaking activities	T1, T3
Reading activities	T1

T1 does not have her students take written tests and grammar is also not graded. Vocabulary tests are in the form of matching activities, students also read and translate texts orally, speak on simpler everyday topics. T5 tries to grade all the four skills, assessing the activities done in lessons. T7 does not use certain criteria when giving grades, but assesses a student's effort. T8 would not grade LD students at all if it was not required in the school curriculum. Both T7 and T8 emphasize the students' sense of success, which is the reason why they allow students to retake tests until they have achieved the grade they want. T2 grades exercises done in lessons because it motivates students to learn. T3 and T6 do not consider some minor misspellings as mistakes. While T3 and T8 give their students tests in addition to checking only vocabulary, T6 claims that LD students are not able to take a test which includes different topics. As T3 and T8 use learning materials that correspond with their students' language levels and their students have been taught according to SNCBS since the beginning of their language studies, but T6 has a more complicated situation, it can be considered that the difference in opinions results from other reasons than just the students' abilities.

The results indicate that giving homework is not a general practice in the case of LD students and teachers mainly consider the students' abilities of working independently on a task when assigning it. Learning words is the most common homework assignment and the main reason might again be that this is something students can do without extra help. Also, vocabulary is the basis of foreign language learning and re-learning words at home gives opportunities for additional practice that LD students need.

2.3.6. Understanding of 'inclusive education'

When asked how they understand the term 'inclusive education', two teachers are vague about it. T2 says that it is teaching "every student according to their abilities" and T4 that it means "using contemporary teaching methods, all students can benefit from it," adding no further comments. Six teachers explicitly refer to teaching SEN students in the mainstream school and express their opinion about it. T1 admits that inclusive education adds extra workload to schools. Two teachers (T6, T7) express concern about the readiness of schools to teach SEN students. Five teachers (T1, T3, T5, T7, T8) doubt whether LD students should be taught in mainstream classes. T1, T7 and T8 who all teach LD students in separate groups agree that in this way students can learn according to their needs and abilities: "their development is noticeable", "LD students must be in a separate class, otherwise there is no inclusion", "I cannot imagine that these students were in the mainstream class". Similarly, T3 and T5 who teach students in the mainstream class admit that LD students do not get the attention they actually need and in some cases working with mainstream students suffers.

Inclusive education has two sides – SEN students should get the opportunity to learn in a mainstream setting and they should get meaningful education according to their needs and abilities. Teachers' responses reveal that they mainly take into account the notion of

placement when deciding whether the requirements of inclusive education are met in their English classroom, but actually the situation cannot be so uniformly defined.

Five respondents teach students in mainstream classes either with their peers or with students of different ages. While four of them (T2-T5) claim that their students are taught inclusively, one teacher (T6) says she is not sure whether her LD students get the education according to their needs and abilities. On the other hand, from the responses to other questions it appears that there might be similar doubts concerning the students of T2-T4. T2 and T3 admit the necessity of individual lessons in order to have opportunities for practicing pronunciation and developing listening and speaking skills. Most of the time their students learn individually, either by themselves or with the teacher's help. As they have different learning materials too, it can be concluded that they have very little contact with their peers other than sitting together in one classroom. T4 says that she has very little time to teach her student individually, the student does the same tasks that the rest of the class (the only adaptations are reducing and omitting some tasks), but most of the material in form 7 is too difficult for him/her. Even T5, who has placed LD students so that she can teach using the same coursebooks in the classroom, says that one student, whose learning difficulties are more serious, still needs more individual (one-to-one) work and she does not have enough time for that. In all the five cases LD students are physically included but may not receive the necessary instruction and may be actually side-lined.

Three teachers teach LD students in a separate class. Two of them (T1 and T8) admit that their students are not taught inclusively. However, T1 says that her students' language skills have developed well in this setting and T8 cannot imagine her LD students in a mainstream class claiming that they would not get the education according to their abilities and the environment would not suit them emotionally. T7 has the same opinion about the placement of LD students as her students have previously studied in mainstream classes and only last

year a separate class was created. She argues that in the mainstream class LD students are deprived of all the necessary guidance and support. In addition, they have to cope with the noise that other students and a teacher inevitably create while dealing with their tasks. So, in all these three cases, students are not physically included but their needs and abilities are considered.

The responses do not indicate occasions where an LD student is in the mainstream setting and at the same time participates in learning together with his/her peers. Only T5 may have succeeded in creating a situation that is closest to inclusion that takes into account both: the placement and the meaningful teaching according to the student's age and abilities.

2.3.7. Teachers' confidence and needs in teaching LD students

All the respondents admit that they became the teachers of LD students either because they were the only teachers of English in their schools or they just got the group with LD students. T1 is the only exception as she had been an assistant teacher for the particular LD students for years before they started learning English and it was a logical way to continue with the same teacher as there was one especially complicated student.

Teachers' confidence seems to depend first and foremost on their experience with teaching LD students and also their training in the field of special needs education. Four respondents (T1, T2, T3, T5) claim to be quite confident. They have had 9-15 years of experience with teaching such students. While the teacher with the longest experience (T2) has had no special training, the other three have (MA in special education, 160-hour course about educating SEN students). T1 admits that as she is not a foreign language teacher, she is afraid that her teaching methods are not appropriate in this area, but has no doubt that she has enough knowledge about SEN students. T2 feels confident, but guilty because lacks time for paying proper attention to both LD students and mainstream students. While T3 says that

she understands SEN students better thanks to the training she has received, T5 claims that her degree in the field of special education gives general knowledge, but real life experience and teachers' creativity matter the most.

Four teachers (T4, T6, T7 and T8), who admit that they lack confidence, have 1-3 years of experience. One of them had a special education course during her university studies and some shorter courses, but three of them have had only some shorter general courses. They admit that their work with LD students is a trial-and-error process, moving on step-by-step, observing students and trying to do their best. They do not know (1) what kind of difficulties SEN students have; (2) what, how and how much they should learn; (3) how to distribute the attention between the LD student and the rest of the class.

All the respondents agree that LD students should be taught English, because (1) English surrounds them every day, they watch films, play computer games, surf the Internet; (2) they might want to travel and see the world; (3) they might have better opportunities in life; (4) they can learn about the other culture which is a necessary general competence; (5) they can communicate with people from other countries. Five teachers emphasize the necessity of acquiring at least the basic knowledge; one of them explains that even if they are not capable of achieving active language production skills, they should at least be able to understand at elementary level. Two teachers (T5, T6) think that in some cases students' exclusion from learning English can be considered. They both have one student who can cope relatively well and another one who has learned for several years, but has not acquired even the basic skills. T6 has very little experience with LD students and is not familiar with the student's previous learning history, so she cannot be sure that the student's poor knowledge of English results from his/her abilities. T5 has taught the student English for five years, but he/she has not advanced from the very basic level and has serious difficulties with remembering words. At the same time T5 admits that maybe such a student can at least get some general knowledge

about the culture and T6 is not sure who, how and when should decide whether a student is capable of learning a foreign language or not.

When asked about what they need in relation to teaching LD students, the respondents point out the following aspects:

- learning materials that are designed according to the needs of LD students;
- in-service training courses about teaching LD students designed especially for foreign language teachers;
- individual lessons for teaching LD students;
- sharing the expertise among foreign language teachers;
- help of support specialists;
- information about LD students' difficulties.

The need for learning materials and teaching techniques is mentioned by seven teachers. The only exception is T2 who has the most experience with LD students and thus claims that she has compiled plenty of materials and does not need any further assistance. T1 says that at the beginning she had to put a lot of energy and time into creating materials and having hands-on-materials would have saved time. Similarly, T3 has also created most of the materials as she has not used any coursebooks so far and thus understands the necessity. T4, T6, T7 and T8 can all be considered the beginners and feel the need for learning materials that are meant especially for LD students. While T7 claims that having special materials would simplify teachers' work even when they have to adapt them according to the need of a particular class or student, T5 believes that using a special coursebook makes teaching LD students in the mainstream class more complicated as teachers have to use two different sets of materials in one class. She expresses the need for ready-made games, pictures for teaching vocabulary by topics, matching activities – so that teachers would not have to “copy, paste, cut, glue and laminate” themselves.

Five respondents mention the lack of proper training. Four of them (T1, T4, T6, T8) want to attend courses that are targeted to foreign language teachers. T3 argues that all teachers should take the course “SEN student in the mainstream school”, because there are still

teachers who do not understand LD students, thinking that they are just lazy and unmotivated. T6 and T8 suggest sharing the expertise between teachers who teach LD students either in the form of direct meetings or the online information bank.

Two teachers (T2, T3) who have LD students in mainstream classes would benefit from individual lessons (at least one per week) and in case the school cannot offer these, T2 would have an assistant teacher. T7 stresses the necessity for specialist support in assessing how students advance and whether they receive appropriate teaching - “we do something but do not see what the result is.” She also claims that a subject teacher is not competent in developing emotional, cognitive and social skills of LD students. T7 and T6 complain that teachers are often not aware of a student’s difficulties because the information is classified and can be revealed only on a parent’s consent.

To conclude, teachers’ confidence in teaching LD students mainly depends on their experience while proper training in the field of special educational needs also gives an advantage. As most of the respondents received teacher education and started their teaching career when LD students were generally taught at special schools, their knowledge about teaching LD students has been acquired out of practical necessity – they had to start teaching LD students. Another aspect is the absence of learning materials for LD students and theoretical material for teachers that would give advice on choosing appropriate teaching techniques. Teachers would also benefit from the cooperation with support specialists and parents as being aware of students’ needs helps to choose an appropriate approach.

2.4. Discussion

The results of the study reveal that there is no uniform approach to teaching English to LD students in Estonian schools. Although some patterns occasionally emerge, further

comments should be taken into consideration as these often reveal different reasons behind certain decisions or opinions.

According to the inclusive policy, SEN students are educated in mainstream schools in their local communities (UNESCO 1994). The European Agency Statistics for Inclusive Education (Watkins et al 2016) considers a setting to be inclusive when a SEN student is educated in a mainstream class for 80% or more of the school week. As the present study gathered information only about the organisation of teaching English, it is not possible to say whether this criterion is followed in the respondents' schools in general, but in English lessons there is almost no variation – LD students learn either in a separate classroom or in a mainstream classroom, which in the terms of placement results in a non-inclusive setting or an inclusive setting respectively. The findings of the present thesis reveal that placement is also the aspect that teachers mainly take into account when concluding whether their students are taught inclusively or not. However, there is more than placement – LD students need to get the education that corresponds with their needs and abilities, they should acquire certain levels and what is required for that is additional help, appropriate learning materials and teaching techniques, and changes in the curriculum. These conditions are more difficult to follow than the placement, but in the case of the SNCBS, even the latter can be complicated.

Although the SNCBS clearly states that foreign language learning for LD students starts in form 5 and is taught two lessons a week (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendix 1 (4.6)), the requirements are not always followed. The situation seems to be better in three schools where LD students learn English in separate classes. In all these schools LD students started learning English in form 5 and the decisions of increasing the weekly lesson number were made considering the students' good advancement. In the three schools LD students are taught in mainstream classes together with their peers and in two schools in mainstream

classes, but not with their peers. In all the five schools, organisation of teaching English varies for different reasons that are explained in detail in the analysis.

There are serious shortages in collaborative planning and teaching. Although all the schools have different support specialists, none of the respondents reported getting any help in teaching English. The only form of collaboration of those pointed out by Mitchell (2014: 71-73) is consultation as three respondents mention getting general information about SEN students and advice on documentation. On the other hand, some teachers do not even consider co-teaching with a special education teacher or an assistant teacher, claiming that they do not know the language. Some teachers have also had in-service training to the extent that they feel they are able to understand LD students and provide them with necessary help. Also, when asked about their needs, only two teachers wish to have more thorough cooperation with specialists in providing information about LD students and assessing whether they receive appropriate instruction and advance in studies, and one teacher would have an assistant teacher's help. Consequently, one area that needs attention in Estonian schools is teamwork as this is the necessary part of inclusive education (UNESCO 1994, Watkins 2012, Räs & Sömer 2016).

Another area which needs more attention, is teacher education (Marsh et al 2015, Räs & Sömer 2016). The results of the study also reveal that those teachers who have received more extensive training in the field of special education, feel more confident about teaching LD students. They employ more various teaching techniques, have compiled numerous materials that are appropriate for LD students and can consider their emotional aspects. However, as one teacher mentions, teacher training provides necessary background, but real life experience matters more, because the cases of special educational needs are very different and no training can provide all the solutions. This coincides with the findings of Räs and Sömer (2016) and with the needs that the respondents have expressed in terms of personal

development: they would like to have in-service training about teaching English for LD students and they would also benefit from sharing the expertise among foreign language teachers. As a result, the teachers who start teaching LD students would feel more secure and would not have to follow the trial-and-error process, not knowing if they do the right thing.

Even when teachers know how to teach LD students, they need resources (Räis & Sömer 2016). The responses to the interviews revealed that what teachers spend the most of their time on and what they need the most are appropriate learning materials, but also knowledge about appropriate teaching techniques. Although all the respondents use coursebooks, they admit that these are too difficult for LD students. Those teachers who have longer experience in teaching LD students report having compiled numerous additional materials and have the repertoire of teaching techniques that they say work well with LD students. Both the materials and teaching techniques mentioned by them are in accordance with the suggestions that are pointed out in the literature review (Marsh et al 2015, Duvall 2007, Wight 2015, Mitchell 2014). The respondents employ illustrative material, videos, games, matching activities, computer-based activities, etc that enable multisensory approach (seeing, listening and doing). They provide scaffolding, direct instruction, revise already learned material, help to connect the new material with the old material. Moreover, the amount of material is reduced and broken into small steps. In case of practising, various exercises are provided so as to avoid monotonous drill. These results indicate that there are teachers whose expertise can be a valuable source for the ‘beginners’.

Besides materials and teaching techniques teachers need appropriate conditions where to apply them. While teaching foreign languages, the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, should be equally developed. Although the same requirement is followed when teaching LD students, extra emphasis is on oral language skills (listening and speaking),

especially at the beginning (Riigi Teataja 2010b: Appendix 1). The results of the study reveal that the best opportunities for developing all the four skills are in the class where all students have the same learning materials and these correspond with the students' language level. One opportunity is to teach LD students in a separate classroom, another in the mainstream class, but taking into account the students actual language level, not the age. Moreover, it is not possible to develop the four language skills without teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Again, the teachers who teach LD students in a separate classroom are at an advantage, including the previously mentioned case of teaching in the mainstream class, but not with peers and using the same materials.

In order to develop social skills and the sense of belonging, students need to be included in the activities together with their classmates. Here the LD students who study in a separate classroom, each following an individual learning plan and using different learning materials, have very few contacts with others than the teacher during an English lesson. As the teacher herself mentions, in that case teaching should be organised so that students learn the same topics, but each one on their language level. This way they can work together, but it also gives more opportunities for revision and connecting the old and the new material. Another case, where students are placed in the mainstream classroom, but not together with their peers and using different learning materials, also offers no contact with classmates. When LD students are in a separate classroom and study according to the same learning plan, they can often interact with each other, but obviously not with other students. However, as some respondents mentioned, LD students are afraid of speaking up in front of the mainstream class, so being in a separate classroom actually promotes interaction more than in the mainstream class where the respondents mention that they try to occasionally engage LD students in pair or group work just with the aim of giving them the sense of belonging while performing the tasks that do not require much.

Despite the complicated situation in foreign language teaching, all the respondents agree that LD students should be given an opportunity to learn a foreign language. Even those two teachers whose experience has raised doubts whether some of LD students are actually able to achieve even the lowest level, are not sure about how and when the decision of exempting a student from foreign language classes can be made. The respondents' opinions coincide with the arguments of several authors (Sparks 2016, Wight 2015, Duvall 2006, Kleinert et al 2007, Marsh et al 2015) stating that language learning gives LD students the same opportunities as to their peers in both everyday life and for the future. One teacher also mentions learning about other cultures which is a necessary general competence as expressed by Wight (2015: 39) and McColl (2005: 105-106).

While Räis & Sömer (2016) also conclude that teachers' attitudes about educating SEN students in mainstream schools are generally positive, they admit that more teachers prefer teaching SEN students in a special class rather than in a mainstream class. Although the respondents of the present study were not asked explicitly which setting they would prefer, the responses to other aspects of teaching English (as discussed in the analysis and in this section) tend to indicate that teaching in a separate classroom would be a better option when the students' development is under consideration. As in this case the contact with peers in the mainstream class is absent, the opportunities for that should be provided in some other lessons or through extra-curricular activities. In addition, the teachers of English might find ways how LD students can occasionally have activities together with their mainstream classmates where they are able to show what they have learned, not just to fulfil some very simple tasks.

If the aim is still to promote teaching LD students together with their peers, it requires changing the attitude to collaborative teaching. None of the respondents have had the experience of co-teaching with a special education teacher or an assistant teacher, thus no

conclusion can be made based on the present study. Moreover, while teaching in a separate classroom requires additional resources (rooms and teachers), demands of proper collaborative teaching might be even higher. Additional staff and separate rooms are still necessary, because assistant teachers who help students in the mainstream classroom need a room for individual instruction or simply for relaxing when a student's emotional state requires it. Also, time for planning collaborative teaching should be provided within the teachers' working hours (in the school timetable).

CONCLUSION

Promoting inclusive education is an ongoing process worldwide, on the European level and consequently, in Estonia. The principles of inclusive education, according to which every person, including those with SEN, has the right of being educated in a mainstream school in their local community together with their peers, are a part of the NCBS. Although teaching in mainstream classes is encouraged, schools are entitled to create special classes when it is for the student's benefit. However, even when a student learns in a separate class, at least part-time participation in the mainstream class should be provided. Regarding the inclusion policy, the number of SEN students in mainstream schools is increasing gradually and schools must be able to educate students who quite recently were supposed to attend a special school. It requires additional resources from schools and from teachers.

One area of the several conditions of special educational needs is cognitive and learning difficulties which vary in severity: moderate, severe and profound learning difficulties. In Estonia, curriculum changes are made as in these cases students are not able to reach the outcomes of the NCBS. Instead, the simplified curriculum (SNCBS), which includes three different learning plans for each level of learning difficulties, is implemented. Students with mild/moderate learning difficulties have difficulty in acquiring basic literacy and in understanding concepts. In addition, they may have problems with speech, low levels of concentration, low self-esteem and poor social and cognitive skills. They may have accompanying special needs, but these are not the main reason for implementing the SNCBS.

According to the SNCBS, LD students start learning English two years later than their peers and have less weekly lessons. It creates a complicated situation for teachers who might have to teach two different curricula in the same classroom, but also for schools that need to organise different timetables for LD students. What makes the situation even more difficult for some teachers, including the teachers of English, is the absence of learning materials that

are created especially for teaching LD students. However, in terms of inclusive education there has been no choice as to manage despite the difficulties. Schools and teachers have developed different approaches according to their best understanding and their opportunities. Thus, there is still confusion and uncertainty as what kind of approach results in meaningful education that takes into account a student's abilities and at the same time promotes the sense of being a part of the class and the school.

The aim of the present master's thesis was to observe and describe the practices of teaching English as a foreign language for students whose learning difficulties require implementing the SNCBS in Estonia. The data for this descriptive study was collected in the form of a semi-structured interview. The convenience sample consisted of eight teachers from three different counties and three different settings: gymnasium, large urban basic school and small rural basic school.

The literature overview provides the insight into three aspects that are relevant for the present study. In the first section, the background for implementing the inclusion policy is described. Also, it is explained how inclusive education is achieved, taking into account the placement, student-centred approach, the role of a teacher, the importance of proper pre-service and in-service training, school wide teamwork and disseminating the examples of good practice. The second section concentrates on the situation of teaching foreign languages to SEN students in general and LD students in particular, also explaining what is behind the learning difficulties and pointing out the teaching strategies that help students to overcome their difficulties. The third section describes the situation of teaching SEN students in Estonia. Firstly, the relevant requirements of the Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, the NCBS and SNCBS are explained. Secondly, the results of the study "Inclusive education of SEN students and the effectiveness of related support

measures” are discussed that reveal the shortcomings in providing inclusive education in Estonia.

The empirical part of the thesis firstly describes the methodology, data collection and the sample and also provides the analysis of the responses that were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews from eight teachers who teach English to LD students in Estonian basic schools. Finally, the discussion points out some important findings and offers suggestions.

The analysis is divided into seven subsections and answers the following questions:

- How is teaching English to LD students organised in schools?
- What kind of learning materials are used?
- Which teaching techniques work well with LD students and which do not work well?
- Do the teachers have opportunities for developing all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing)? How much time do they spend on teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar?
- How often do the teachers give homework to and how do they assess LD students?
- How do the teachers understand the term of ‘inclusive education’?
- Are they confident about teaching LD students? What kind of help do they need most?

The responses reveal that the situation in teaching English to LD students who need implementing the SNCBS varies from school to school. Although some patterns emerge, it is hard to draw any general conclusions in regards of the most suitable arrangement. Teaching English is organised in three different ways: (1) in a separate classroom, (2) in a mainstream class together with peers, and (3) in a mainstream class, but not with peers. In four schools the requirements of the SNCBS in regards of beginning English teaching in form 5 and having two lessons per week are followed. Situations are different in other four schools. The reasons behind such decisions vary. None of the respondents has had experience with co-teaching with a special education teacher or an assistant teacher, and only two teachers would like a special education teacher to give them information about LD students, advice on choosing appropriate teaching techniques and assessing a student. Only

one teacher would have an assistant teacher's help, but it is her second choice after having individual lessons with the student.

The most frequently used coursebook is ILE, but the respondents consider it to be too difficult for LD students. Three teachers use other textbooks, but only one teacher admits that the coursebook she uses is good for teaching LD students. Consequently, there is need for additional materials. The more experienced teachers have compiled numerous materials during their practice of teaching LD students and admit that this is the aspect on which they have spent a great amount of their time. The teachers who have recently begun teaching LD students express their need for additional materials. As responses about materials compiled and teaching techniques employed coincide to a great extent with the suggestions of the authors of previous studies about teaching LD students (as described in the literature overview), it can be assumed that the teachers who have experience in teaching LD students and/or have had more extensive training in the field of special education, might be a valuable source of expertise for the non-experienced colleagues. The need for sharing experiences with colleagues was also expressed by the respondents, in addition to the need for special in-service training for foreign language teachers.

The best opportunities for developing all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar are in classes where all students have the same learning materials which correspond with their language levels. Although separate settings offer no interaction with mainstream class students, the teachers in these settings are able to engage their students in speaking activities, pair work and group work more than in mainstream classes. One reason is that LD students are afraid of speaking in front of their classmates and another that they are not able to participate in the mainstream class on equal level.

The term ‘inclusive education’ is understood as placement – LD students in mainstream classes are reported as being included and LD students in separate classes as not being included. At the same time, the three teachers who teach LD students in separate classes, point out that they consider such setting much more suitable for their students, and three other teachers admit that their LD students in mainstream classes do not get necessary attention. The findings indicate that while in a separate classroom LD students have no opportunities for social interaction with their mainstream peers, they actually get the appropriate instruction and as a result, more meaningful education.

Teachers’ confidence in teaching LD students mainly depends on their experience while appropriate training in the field of special educational needs provides a necessary theoretical background. Some teachers also claim that having materials that are created especially for LD students and getting advice about suitable teaching techniques would save time, but also give teachers guidelines about what is right in the case of LD students. Despite their difficulties and confusion, all the respondents agree that LD students must have an opportunity to learn a foreign language.

The main findings as pointed out in the discussion are the following:

- inclusion is more than just placement in a mainstream class and the best setting for teaching a foreign language seems to be a separate classroom;
- team-teaching should be encouraged more, in the form of consultation and co-teaching, time for collaborative planning and assessment is included in the teachers working hours;
- teachers should receive appropriate training in the field of special needs education, but as experience also matters, experienced teachers should act as experts and share their knowledge;
- LD-appropriate learning materials should be created that teachers can easily adopt to their students’ needs and experienced teachers should act as advisors in this process, because they know what works well with LD students;

In conclusion, the present thesis has described the practices of teaching English to students whose learning difficulties require implementing the SNCBS. The aspects of organising teaching at the school level, the content of learning, placing teaching into the

inclusion framework, and teachers' perceptions, confidence and needs have been taken into account. The thesis might be of interest to teachers who teach or start teaching English (or some other foreign language) to LD students, but also to other educators who have to deal with the needs of LD students or of teachers who teach them.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

The focus of the interview on teaching students with learning difficulties who are taught according to the Simplified National Curriculum for Basic Schools, following the recommendations from a counselling committee.

Background information

Age:

Qualifications/degree:

Current occupation at school:

General teaching experience:

Experience with students with learning difficulties:

Training received in the field of special education:

Age/grade of students with learning difficulties this year:

Teaching English

1. How is teaching English to students with learning difficulties organised at your school?
 - 1.1 When did your students start learning English?
 - 1.2 How many lessons per week have they had?
 - 1.3 Are the students taught in general classroom, in a separate classroom or both ways?
 - 1.4 What kind of support staff/special educators do you have at your school?
 - 1.5 What kind of help do you get from them?
2. Please describe what kind of materials you use when teaching students with learning difficulties.

- 2.1 Do you use set coursebooks? Which ones? Are the same coursebooks used when teaching the peers of the students with learning difficulties?
- 2.2 Do you make adjustments to coursebooks? Please describe your best practices.
- 2.3 Do you create additional materials? Please describe your best practices.
3. Do your students have enough opportunities for developing all the four language skills – listening, reading, speaking, writing? How much do you deal with vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar?
4. How do you assess your students' work?
5. Describe some teaching techniques that have worked well with your students.
6. What is the proportion of frontal teaching, group work, pair work and individual work?
7. What kind of home assignments do you give? How often?
8. Describe some teaching techniques that have not worked with your students.
9. How do you understand the term “inclusive education “?
10. Do you feel that you are able to meet the requirements of inclusive education while teaching students with learning difficulties?
11. Do you feel that students with learning difficulties should be taught a foreign language or should they only focus on their native language? Why?
12. How/Why have you become the teacher of students with learning difficulties?
13. Do you feel secure and self-confident when teaching students with learning difficulties? Why?/Why not?
14. What kind of help do you feel that you need the most?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Merle Paat

Practices of teaching English as a Foreign Language in the Case of Students with Learning Difficulties in Estonian Basic Schools

Inglise keele kui võõrkeele õpetamise olukord õpiraskustega õpilaste puhul Eesti põhikoolides

Magistritöö

2018

Lehekülgede arv: 74

Eesti kuulub nende riikide hulka, kes rakendavad hariduses kaasamise põhimõtteid. See tähendab, et põhiharidus on võrdselt tagatud igale inimesele, hoolimata tema sotsiaalmajanduslikust taustast, rahvusest, soost, elukohast või hariduslikest erivajadustest. Lapsevanematel on õigus oma lapsele kool valida ning põhikool peab vastu võtma kõik õpilased, kelle jaoks see on elukohajärgne kool. Selle tulemusena on tavakoolis järjest rohkem neid õpilasi, kes veel üsna hiljuti said hariduse erikoolides. Nende hulka kuuluvad ka õpiraskustega õpilased, kes ei suuda saavutada põhikooli riikliku õppekava (PRÕK) õpiväljundeid ning kelle puhul tuleb kohaldada põhikooli lihtsustatud õpekava (LÕK). Inglise keele õpetamine LÕK õpilastele ei ole Eestis siiani saanud piisavalt riiklikku tähelepanu: puuduvad spetsiaalsed õppematerjalid; puudub selgus selles osas, kuidas oleks LÕK tunniplaani kõige õigem kohaldada; milliseid õppemeetodeid kasutada.

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärgiks on kirjeldada olukorda inglise keele õpetamisel LÕK õpilastele Eesti põhikoolides. Põhitähelepanu pööratakse järgmistele aspektidele: LÕK õppe korraldamine koolides (kas õpilasi õpetatakse tavaklassis või eraldi, missugune on tunnikoormus, kas kasutatakse tugispetsialistide abi); õppe sisu (õppematerjalid, õppemeetodid, hindamine); kas inglise keele õpetamine LÕK õpilastele toimub kaasava hariduse tingimustes; mida õpetajad arvavad inglise keele õpetamise kohta LÕK õpilastele, kui enesekindlalt nad end tunnevad ning millised on nende vajadused. Selleks viidi läbi kvalitatiivne deskriptiivne uurimus, mille käigus intervjueriti kaheksat Eesti üldhariduskooli õpetajat ajavahemikus märts-aprill 2018. Uurimuses kasutati poolstruktureeritud intervjuud ning tegemist oli mugavusvalimisega.

Magistritöö sissejuhatuses antakse ülevaade sellest, kuidas kaasava hariduse põhimõtete rakendamine Eestis on mõjutanud hariduslike erivajadustega õpilaste õppekorraldust, defineeritakse peamised hariduslikud erivajadused ning viidatakse kolmele eelnevale uurimusele inglise keele õpetamise osas hariduslike erivajadustega õpilaste puhul, mis viidi läbi Tartu Ülikooli anglistika osakonna magistrantide poolt. Kirjanduse ülevaade keskendub kolmele aspektile: kaasava hariduse põhimõtted, võõrkeelte õpetamise põhimõtted LÕK õpilaste puhul mujal maailmas ja Eestis ning hariduslike erivajadustega õpilaste õpetamise olukord Eestis. Töö teine osa kirjeldab esiteks uurimismeetodite valimist ning valimi moodustamise põhimõtteid ning teiseks analüüsib intervjuude käigus saadud andmeid vastavalt töö eesmärgile.

Uurimuse käigus ilmnes, et LÕK õpilaste õppetöö on koolides korraldatud erinevatel viisidel ning kui kolm peamist viisi (eraldi klassis, tavaklassis koos eakaaslastega ning

tavaklassis kuid mitte koos eakaaslastega) eralduvadki, siis põhjused antud korralduse valimise osas erinevad ikkagi. Selgus, et inglise keele õpetajad saavad väga vähe toetust tugispetsialistidelt ning ei eeldagi seda, sest tugispetsialistid ei valda inglise keelt. Vaid kaks õpetajat ootaks rohkem koostööd tugispetsialistidega LÕK õppe planeerimise ja edukuse hindamise ning õpilaste erivajadustest informeerimise osas. Üks õpetaja kasutaks tugiõpetaja abi, kuid tema esimeseks eelistuseks on pigem individuaaltund.

Üsnagi ootuspäraselt selgus, et kõige efektiivsem on LÕK õpilaste õpetamine eraldi klassiruumis. Kuigi selline õppekorraldus ei võta arvesse kaasava hariduse ühte aspekti – kontakti eakaaslastega, kindlustab see LÕK õpilaste võimetekohase arengu. Kõige rohkem väljendati vajadust LÕK õppematerjalide järele, sest tavaõpikud ei sobi LÕK õpilastele ning õpetajad on aastate jooksul ise pidanud materjale koguma. Õpetajate poolt kirjeldatud materjalid ja õppemeetodid on valitud LÕK õpilaste iseärasusi silmas pidades. Kuigi mitmed vastanuteist on läbinud hariduslike erivajaduste alase taseme- või täienduskoolitus, tuuakse välja, et tegelik ekspertiis saavutatakse alles töö käigus, kuna erivajaduste spekter on väga lai ning kõike ette näha ei saa.

Eelnevast lähtuvalt võiks kogemustega LÕK õpetajaid rakendada ekspertidena nii materjalide koostajate kui ka õpetajate nõustamisel, sest peale spetsiaalse koolitusvajaduse (inglise keele õpetamine LÕK õpilastele) on õpetajad välja toonud omavahelise kogemuste vahetamise olulisuse.

Märksõnad: inglise keele õpetamine, kaasav haridus, hariduslike erivajadustega õpilane, õpiraskustega õpilane, lihtsustatud õppekava.

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Mina, MERLE PAAT ,

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**PRACTICES OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE
CASE OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN ESTONIAN BASIC
SCHOOLS,**

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